

*The Word of God: Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Proclamation***Aaron Smith, Ph.D.**Experience: Associate Professor  
of Theology at Colorado Christian  
University*The Word of God: Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Proclamation**The **Word of God** is both the source  
and norm of theology.**The Word of God is the  
revelation of God, which  
defines the existence of God.*

The Word of God is both the source and norm of theology. That was the central point of our previous lecture on method. Both what we say of God and how we say it are given by God in what He says about Himself. We presume neither to generate thoughts and speech of God from within ourselves, nor to systematize our thoughts and speech according to accepted conventions of knowledge, specifically, the guiding expectations of disinterested objectivity. Rather, we receive our content and procedure for thinking and speaking of God from God. His thoughts and speech generate and shape our own, making our examination to be entirely invested in its object. There is no examining God apart from the movement of God toward us. Derived from God's address, our method is dialectic, confession, response, and exegesis. This basic orientation should become clearer as we now direct our attention to the all-determinative Word of God.

The Word of God is the revelation of God, which revelation defines the existence of God. This is a complex thesis, so get ready to wade through a challenging set of ideas. The water gets deep quickly in this area of the pool! You may want to pause this lecture at various points and attempt to restate its observations in your own words. And there is no crime in replaying this material a couple of times!

We'll start with the first part of the thesis: The Word of God is the revelation of God. The Christian God speaks. He tells us who He is. He causes Himself to stand before us and in so doing makes Himself to be known. Notice that He makes Himself to be known in standing before us. We saw this last time in our discussion of method: God gives both the content of our knowledge of Him and the way by which we know Him in the singular event of His speaking. God's Word is not a datum, a fixed piece of information, which we filter through our cognition like we do other objects. No, God's Word is a living modality, which constantly shows us both our inadequacy for God and His adequacy for us. In standing before

*In His Word God makes Himself to be grasped as one who cannot be grasped.*

*We cannot think and speak of God strictly in terms of His humility and lose sight of His majesty.*

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Thesis, Part 2: *The Christian God Speaks as He speaks.*

us, God's revelation rewires our neural circuitry and enables us to appreciate Him as God, as one who is known as unknown. Here is the dialectic: In His Word, God makes Himself to be grasped as one who cannot be grasped. He makes Himself a servant and in so doing shows Himself to be Lord and Maker.

We cannot slip off either edge of this ridge. We cannot think and speak of God strictly in terms of lordly majesty and lose sight of His servant humility. That would be to manufacture an aloof deity, a god of the deists, perhaps, whose glory prevents Him from really engaging in the messiness of creation, in the banalities of human existence, in ugliness, pain, suffering, and death.

Neither can we think and speak of God strictly in terms of His humility and lose sight of His majesty. That would be to call man "God," to manufacture an idol that lives, moves, and has His being in the sequences of creaturely existence and not the other way around; one who knows ugliness, sorrow, and death but can do nothing about them.

So far as we know, there is no God above, beyond, beside, or beneath the servant Lord and lordly servant. Our every thought and speech of God confesses both His majesty and humility, for this is how God reveals Himself to us.

That brings us to the second part of our thesis: God's revelation defines the existence of God. It is not as if God stands in eternity and lobs pieces of information about Himself into time. At least we know of no such God (except, perhaps through mistaken projections of a fallen imagination). The only God we know stands before us in time and exists in this act. He takes up the stuff of space-time—flesh, history, language—and speaks in these terms. He shows Himself to be Lord over these terms, indeed, but shows us that lordship really in these terms. God has His lordship; in other words, He exists as God in the act of revealing who and what He is in the terms of who and what He is not.

God's act of accommodating Himself to His creature, His speaking to us in the terms of our flesh and language—this act is God. God has His being in coming to us. The Word of God is God Himself. The Word of God is not a subordinate agent of God, a messenger or angel. Rather, the revelation of God—what He says and how He says it— simply is the defining life and action of God. In His revelation, in His turning to humankind and making Himself known among us, He lives and acts as Lord and Maker. Just here,

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### **The Word of God is God Himself.**

- Defining His life and action  
- Incarnated in the Son of God

John 1:1

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*

*Content and method of theology derive from God's Word.*

just now, in this event, He exercises unrivaled power over what He is not. He creates and shapes the being and doing by which His love, mercy, holiness, righteousness, power, and presence are lived out and communicated externally.

Where do I get these ideas? On what basis do I make this dialectical confession of faith? I can only make these claims about the Word of God on the ground and after the manner of the incarnation of the Son of God, which is to say, on the ground and after the manner of Christ Jesus.

The Lord who is servant and the servant who is Lord—this is obviously enough Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of God, who at once is God.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1).*

This Word, which John later tells us took up flesh, dwelled among us, and bore the name Jesus (vv. 14-17), exists both with God and as God—with and as. What language would you use, young theologian, to express this reality? The gospel does not invite us to lose the “with” in the “as” or the “as” in the “with.” It does not say that the Word seems to exist alongside God, to be with Him, but that is a mirage. Don’t be fooled by Jesus’ humanity; the Word is really God! Nor does it say that the Word looks a lot like God, that it seems to be one with God, but is really another entity next to God. Don’t be fooled by Jesus’ divinity; He is really just a man! It confesses both that the Word is a second alongside God and that this second is one with God, and invites us to confess both.

So what would you say? Would you say that the Word is simultaneously the agent of God and the agency? Or that the Word is both God’s action and life? Or that the Word is the revelation of God, which revelation determines the existence of God? So far as I can tell, these are equivalent ways of expressing the core truth of John. These are equally adequate theological formulations. They are expressions of God’s truth sourced in and shaped after God’s Word.

Let’s step back for a moment and try to get a handle on what we’ve been doing. We have said that the content and method of theology derive from God’s Word. But that obtains even when we theologians identify and describe the Word itself. We can only

*We respond to God's Word,  
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**Jesus Christ**  
and Gospel of John

think and speak of the Word on the basis and after the manner of the Word. We are already moving within the Word even when we name and express the Word. If we are not already in the Word, then on what basis and after what manner are we naming and expressing the Word? Have we tapped into a deep pocket of religious consciousness according to which we may intuit what the Word of God is and is not? Have we granted ourselves a point outside of God's address by which we may examine it? Would that not be to place ourselves in the position of God, making our thought and speech precedent, in which case the thought and speech standing before ours cannot be God's address after all?

We are, instead, responding to God's Word, confessing what it tells us about Him. Our confession takes dialectical shape because the Word takes dialectical shape. The Word comes from God to Man and is thus with God, but in its coming it reveals God fully and totally and thus exists as God. Our confession is thus exegetically derived. It draws the meaning of the Word from the Word. This meaning may be expressed in various ways according to various contextual needs. Theological thought and speech reflect the freedom of the Lord to take up servanthood without losing His majesty by taking up the logic and vernacular customs of diverse settings without losing the core truth of God's speech. Theology is always correcting and accepting, accepting and correcting the thought-structures and idioms of the setting in which it finds itself responding to the Word.

Additionally, still getting a handle on our treatment of the Word, we note that we have been thinking and speaking in terms of Jesus Christ and in terms of the gospel of John's witness to Christ. We have implied that both are somehow forms of God's authoritative speech; both are forms of the Word. As if things were not complex enough, we now must wade deeper! Just as the Word exists at once with and as God, so in turn human witness to the Word exists at once with and as the Word. Just as Christ Jesus is with God and is God, just as He expresses who God is by being the very life and action of God, so also the prophetic and apostolic witness to Christ express the Word by their unity with and differentiation from the Word, by being its life and action.

To be as concrete as possible, when I say that theological thought and speech blossom from and take shape after the Word of God, I mean that they come about in response to the history of God with man lived in Jesus of Nazareth from AD 1-30, to the prophetic expectation of that history in the Old Testament and

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### Jesus Christ is the Word of God



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### As Christ, God's "Word" is God's Self

- The Word is not Deity abstractly considered,  
but Immanuel, God being God-with-us.

the apostolic testimony to it in the New, and to the ongoing proclamation of biblical witness to Christ by the church. In short, the all-determinative Word of God takes a threefold form: Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Christian proclamation. We must consider this in some detail.

In the first and highest place, Christ Jesus is the Word of God. God becomes flesh. That astonishing truth is what we learn from the man of Nazareth. God is God in living as Man. He is God in being Lord over what He is not, which we learn through His living, dying, and rising as a human being. This lordly existence taking place in the self-emptying act of assuming the form of a servant is what from its earliest days the Christian faith has confessed to be "God's Word."

What sense can we make of this confession? Jesus of Nazareth was made of flesh, blood, skin, and bones. Word is a means of communication, a sign comprised of vocal tones recorded in letters. How can we identify Jesus with the Word? Are we speaking metaphorically? Are we saying that Christ is like the Word, that He represents the Word, or that He expresses the truth of God as if He was the Word? Certainly not!

Christ Jesus is God's Word. We do not begin with general categories of sign and symbol and try to figure out how the man Jesus fits these. Rather, we begin with Jesus and allow our categories to be defined by Him. As Christ, God's "Word" is God's self-defining act. He is that modality by which God operates as God, by which He exists as Lord over all that He is not. The Word is God's creative power continually actualized to bring life out of death, light out of darkness, beings out of chaos and emptiness. The Word is not speech in general terms, but God's speech, the fiat power and authority to reconcile, redeem, and create not only from afar, but also from within. The Word is not deity abstractly considered, but Immanuel, God being God-with-us.

Of course, not everyone confesses these things about Christ. That does not make Him to be the Word of God only to and among those who do confess Him. Christ exists as the Word of God, as God's self-defining act of bringing life out of death and nonbeing for those who know Him and those who do not know Him, for those whose lives are His and those who exist in hidden or open rebellion against Him. In every case, He gives life to those who do not deserve it and will be their Lord.



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### *The Word of God is the grace of God*

- God is God in coming to man
- God is God in saving man
- Persistent, active love

In this, the Word of God is the grace of God. The self-defining act of God is a merciful act; it is pure benevolence, unmerited love and forgiveness. We have not said enough if we simply say that God is God in coming to man. God is God in saving man; He turns to us to make us His own, as indeed we ought to be, for we have no basis for existence otherwise. The Word of God is the love by which God forgives our delusional ways of rebellion and gives us life. It is this persistent, active love, which defines God's existence and which calls theology up from its recipients. Theology is a reverberative extension of God's graciousness, the ongoing expression of His love on human lips. Its dialectic is not therefore merely a back-and-forth between human inadequacy for God and His adequacy for us, since the latter is always greater than the former. God's yes is louder than his no, and Christian theology should reflect as much. Cynical, gloomy, life-denying judgmentalism can hardly be theology deriving from and shaped after God's Word.

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### *Scripture is the Word of God*

In the second and subordinate place, Scripture is the Word of God. In continuation of the situation that we just discussed concerning Christ, God addresses us in the constitutive features of what He is not, and in fact makes Himself to be Immanuel, God-with-us in so doing. As He took up the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, so also He takes up the prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ Jesus as the medium of His revelation. By the Spirit, He makes these words to be truthful, which is to say, to correspond and really to become one with His reality.

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*Inspiration: The Spirit's work of inducing and enabling certain individuals to bear authoritative witness to Christ Jesus.*

He does this. The words do not speak to Him and call Him forth; He called them forth and speaks in and through them. Here we come to the venerable Christian doctrine of inspiration. Inspiration refers to the Spirit's work of inducing and enabling certain individuals to bear authoritative witness to Christ Jesus either by way of anticipation or contemporary declaration. This act of inducing and enabling is undefined in the details, but involves generating a truthful perception and account of God's self-defining action in Jesus of Nazareth. The Scriptures are comprised of words spoken by those whose hearts and minds were flooded with the light of God's grace and truth, whose every perceptual capacity was filled with the knowledge of Jesus Christ. They spoke of what they saw and heard, of what they perceived, or better, by God's own act upon them they were made to perceive God's decisive action in and through His Messiah, and their words continue to speak the very same truth to us.

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**God freely makes His being relative to us in and through Scripture.**

- Words of prophets and apostles
- Received summons; empowered to obey
- Founding witnesses
- Renew commitment to these writings

This is a dynamic situation, an event, the happening of God's Word, the reiteration of God's very being as being-for-us. God is not trapped by Scripture, but He freely makes His being relative to us in and through Scripture as we are illuminated in a manner cognate to that of the prophets and apostles to perceive God in their words.

But we must be stress in their words, not ours, for neither our illumination nor anyone else's is also inspiration. The dynamic event of God's revelation in human words is not to be expected in any collection of human words. There is a great and total specificity to these words. These are the words of prophets and apostles. These are the words of persons who spoke about God in a way that we do not speak about Him because these individuals were summoned by God to play a role in His history in a way that we are not. They help to make up that arc of figures, events, and ideas within which we find ourselves. We come to plead our case and identify our being and doing in theirs, not the other way around.

Scripture does not try to prove to us that these special persons are special for this reason. It simply makes the claim and operates according to the expectation that these individuals received their summons and were empowered to obey it in a manner and setting that we are not.

For this reason, we may say that while in principle the collection of biblical texts may be open, since the Spirit remains free to open hearts and minds to an accurate perception and account of God's truth, in reality it is closed. In the arc of God's history with humanity the prophets and apostles have played a unique and decisive role. They have been summoned to bear a founding witness, to be the rock upon which God would build His church. We are called to reiterate that witness, not to replace it.

Why they were chosen, what they foretold, who they proclaimed, how they found this one to be their Lord—these questions are live matters for the church in every generation. By the Spirit, the church is called again and again to renew its understanding of and be renewed in its commitment to these writings. But in asking and answering these questions, it does not imagine itself composing addenda to them, certainly not correcting them as if it has attained a higher vantage point vis-à-vis God and His relation to the world. It submits to their authority as participating in God's history with man in Christ Jesus, not vice versa.

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Prophets: *Writers of the Old Testament*

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*Christian proclamation  
is the Word of God.*

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*The Word is performed at the  
intersection of the biblical text with:*

1. Spirit's leading
2. Pastor's hard efforts
3. Contemporary setting

With the word prophet, I mean primarily the writers of the Old Testament; and by the word apostle, I am referring to the writers of the New. Specifically, I am speaking of the 39 books of the Protestant OT and the 27 books of the Protestant NT. We are not taking up the issue of the canonized Apocrypha in other traditions, nor are we considering the noncanonized but also wise teachings of, say, the Gospel of Thomas. We are prepared by the Spirit in the context of the church to recognize Genesis through Malachi and Matthew through Revelation as the definitive, truthful, and authoritative revelation of God.

In the third and also subordinate sense, then, Christian proclamation is the Word of God. Christ is proclaimed by prophets and apostles, and this proclamation—strictly this proclamation—is reiterated in the church. Witnesses are called today in and through these witnesses of former times, and God speaks in their words too. The Word of God is alive and active; it illuminates hearts and minds and brings about faith, obedience, and ongoing speech.

What happens in the act of preaching is that Scripture is interpreted and performed for a fresh hearing and receiving. It is interpreted in the pastor's prayerful study and exegesis during the week. The minister of the Word meditates upon the passage at hand, ingests it, turns it over and over in an effort to understand it, usually in consultation with several writings about the text and always in supplication that the Holy Spirit guides his or her thoughts to truth. And he or she does so with a view to the particular joys, concerns, problems, hopes, fears, shortcomings, goals—the stuff of life with which the congregation is confronted week in and week out.

The Word is performed, then, as the intersection of the biblical text first (always first!), together with the Spirit's leading, the pastor's hard efforts, and the contemporary setting. In this juncture or meeting point of the Spirit's inspired words in Scripture—His illuminating influence—and the pastor's own words, the very Word of God is spoken anew into our modern joys, concerns, problems, and so forth.

There are two elements to this description that must be stressed. The first is that the Word of God in the context of a sermon is not something that the pastor controls and, with the right set of incantations, reproduces every Sunday. On the contrary, it is the product of the Holy Spirit. The Word of God occurs in preaching



*The Word of God occurs in preaching as the product of the Holy Spirit.*

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*Preaching is a repetition of prophecy and apostolic testimony*

*One comes to knowledge of the Word through proclamation of the testimony of prophets and apostles to Jesus Christ*

as an event over which neither pastor nor congregation bears any control. It happens or does not happen at God's discretion. What the pastor and congregation have is God's promise that he will in fact speak in our words. He will occasion his presence among us wherever and whenever two or three are gathered in Christ's name (Matt. 18:20). But the guarantee is God's and not ours. There is no hidden, magical key by which we open the box containing God's voice. Preaching is therefore an event governed by the action of the Holy Spirit, whose action is promised to us but as such is not given over to us.

The second element about preaching that we must stress at this stage is that it is not prophecy or apostolic testimony. It is rather the repetition of prophecy and apostolic testimony. The Word of God as it occurs in preaching is not an original Word in the sense that the minister comes up with something new and possibly at odds with what God spoke previously through the founding words of the prophets and apostles.

The minister is no guru, sage, or maharishi, and his words do not become a final authority for the church at large. Rather, what the pastor repeats in his own words is nothing other than the Word, which God spoke through the prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT.

One comes to knowledge of the Word through proclamation of the testimony of prophets and apostles to Jesus Christ. Yet in this one perceives that Jesus Christ is the condition of the words of the prophets and apostles and their ongoing proclamation; that He is primary in the order of being, and they are secondary. Proclamation points to Scripture, which points to Christ, and Christ is the ground of Scripture, which is the ground of proclamation. Everything points to Jesus and flows from Him.

We must conclude, then, that Christ is the Word in a primary sense. Scripture and proclamation are the Word in a secondary sense. They participate in the Word and so become one with it even as they remain human words. Their authority is a derived authority, an extension of the power of Christ by His Spirit to summon obedient recipients of God's revelation.

The Word of God is thus revolution in a twofold sense. God's truth flows from Christ Jesus and circles back to Him. Christ calls obedient listeners, who in turn proclaim what they have heard. And in this activity, the Word is God's revolution against the

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### **Christ**

- A derived authority
- An extension of the power of God
- A continuation of the life and act of Christ
- Summon obedient response by the Holy Spirit

powers of darkness and sin. He overcomes human predilection to death by generating actual, meaningful, transformational thought and speech patterned after the light of His Word.